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Sartre, Wittgenstein, and Learning from Imagination

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10.1 Introduction

A well-documented aim of conceptual art is the undermining of the traditional idea of an artwork as a single physically present object. A common method of achieving this is to present to the viewer a prompt designed to make her think of some absent thing. This may take the form of a written description, a title, a map or set of instructions; the absent entity may be a situation, an event, a process, or an object. To take some examples: Laurence Weiner's *Statements*, consisting of descriptions of objects or processes, such as 'One quart exterior green enamel thrown on a brick wall';[1] Douglas Huebler's *New York—Boston Shape Exchange*, which uses 'maps and instructions to propose the creation of identical hexagons (one in each city) 3,000 feet on a side, whose points would be marked by white stickers 1 inch in diameter';[2] Walter de Maria's *Vertical Earth Kilometer* (see Illustration 11), consisting of a one-kilometer long brass rod sunk into the ground with only the top end visible, a small brass disc 2 inches across; John Baldessari's text-only 'narrative paintings', such as 'Semi-close-up of girl

[1] Documented in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 37.

[2] Roberta Smith 'Conceptual Art' in Nikos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art*, 3rd edn. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 261.

by geranium (soft view) finishes watering it—examines plant to see if it has any signs of growth—finds slight evidence—smiles—one part is sagging—she runs fingers along it—raises hand over plant to encourage it to grow';[3] Iain and Elaine Baxter's 'imaginary visual experiences';[4] Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*, which in addition to photographic illustrations displays the instruction 'Choosing a person at random, in the street, any location, each day. Following him wherever he goes, however long or far he travels. (The activity ends when he enters a private place—his home, office, etc.)'; and so on.

Prima facie it seems plausible to claim that the imagination of the viewer is importantly involved in appreciation of such works, as part of what understanding them requires. Such a claim is apparently endorsed by Mel Bochner when he writes that '[i]magination is a word that has been generally banned from the vocabulary of recent art . . . There is, however, within the unspecified usage of the word a function which infuses the process of making and seeing art. . . . Imagination is a projection, the exteriorizing of ideas about the nature of things seen. It reproduces that which is initially without product'.[5] For many conceptual works, then, it is natural to assume that viewers are supposed to attend, not only to whatever object is given in perceptual experience, but also, in imaginative thought, to some absent object, action, event, or idea.

Let's assume that there are two principal kinds of imagining: 'bare' propositional imagining (imagining that *p*, where *p* stands for some proposition, with no associated imagery);[6] and visualizing (imagining which involves a visual image, or 'image' associated with some other sense modality). Often, as with many of the examples cited above, the viewer is supposed to imagine what the relevant absent entity would look like if it existed physically, i.e. to visualize it,[7] although more rarely it may be that what she is supposed to imagine has no correlate in sense experience, in which case propositional imaging may be what is required. Where visualizing is required by a work, it is also natural to assume that the

[3] Documented in Lippard, *ibid.*, 58. [4] Documented in *ibid.*, 67.

[5] Mel Bochner, 'Excerpts from Speculation; *Artforum*, 8/9 (May 1970), 79–83 quoted in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000), 194–5.

[6] Though rough, this is accurate enough for my purposes.

[7] More rarely, one might be required to imagine an experience in another sense modality, e.g. Bruce Naumann's instruction 'Drill a hole in the heart of a large tree and insert a microphone. Mount the amplifier and speaker in an empty room and adjust the volume to make audible any sound that might come from the tree'. Documented in Lippard, *ibid.*, 162–3.

viewer's images play a genuinely informative role, in so far as by having them she learns, at least, what the relevant absent entity would look like,[8] were it to exist physically. Reflection upon such information plausibly may lead or contribute to other thoughts of intrinsic value connected to the work's meaning.

One might be wary of the claim that imagining, and visualizing in particular, is involved in understanding conceptual works, on the grounds that it apparently commits us to treating works and the thoughts to which they give rise as quasi-aesthetic objects, something that many conceptual artists wish to avoid. Such wariness would be misplaced, however. That such imagining is required does not entail that the viewer should focus on the aesthetic aspects of the imagined object or experience, but only the perceptible ones, assuming these are different. Furthermore, even where she does the former, it may only be instrumentally important that she do so, for the more abstract thoughts and concepts onto which she is then led. In any case, even if it does entail this, to rule out the thought of aesthetic properties *a priori* as irrelevant to the comprehension of a piece of conceptual art seems to me to be unnecessarily restrictive.

I suppose it might be objected instead that in grasping conceptual artworks such as the ones described, what needs to be understood is simply the thought that the relevant artwork is not a visible material object, and not some further image or thought of what is absent. The former thought, it might be argued, conveys all that the artist wishes to, which is that a material object in the traditional sense is not essential to the experience of art. Yet this response also seems wrong, in so far as it reduces the meaning of all such conceptual works to a single point, which might be made equally well by any one of them, thus rendering the others redundant. In addition it seems wrong, both with regard to the particular works described and in general, to rule out in advance any of the meanings which might be derived from a full imaginative exploration of a conceptual work in its specifics.

Hence as yet we have encountered no good reason to deny that imagination can be important to the comprehension of conceptual works. There looms a threat to this view from other quarters, however: this time, more worryingly, from eminent philosophical ones. Jean-Paul Sartre denies that learning about objects from visualizing is possible, arguing that the image teaches nothing, never produces an impression of novelty, and never reveals any aspect of

[8] Learning what things would look like, I take it, may include learning about their aesthetic aspects, but is not confined to it.

the object.[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein agrees: '. . . imaging . . . does not instruct us about the external world'.[10]

Their respective grounds, which shall be discussed in more depth shortly, can be summarised as follows:[11]

1. One does not observe mental images.
2. One does not interpret mental images, as one would signs or pictures.
3. Mental images are constituted by the thinker, not received from the world.
4. Mental images are subject to the will.
5. Mental images are superfluous to any conclusion reached.
6. One cannot be misled about the object of one's mental image.

If these claims and the conclusions drawn from them by their authors are right, then there are apparent consequences for the claim that visual imagining is important to the grasping of the point of many conceptual works. If one can learn nothing new about the world from visualizing—if our images are somehow unreliably connected to what is the case, and cannot genuinely inform us about entities in the world—then the idea that through visualizing in response to a conceptual work, we can come to some new knowledge of the appearance of an absent object or situation, and through that, of further ideas or concepts, looks pressurized.[12]

[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (London: Methuen, (1972), 9 (henceforth *POI*).

[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, II, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), §79 (henceforth *RPPII*).

[11] Sartre and Wittgenstein each tend to take certain of these conclusions as supported by others on the list. For instance, Wittgenstein connects (4) to (1) (e.g. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, I, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), §131 (henceforth *RPPI*); *RPPII*, §885); and to (3) (e.g. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), §632). Meanwhile, Sartre defends (1) by citing (6) (*POI,* 7) and (3) (*ibid.*). For this reason, it is somewhat artificial to take each of these conclusions separately. Nonetheless I shall do so, since I think that they can be separated, and since my primary goal is to see whether any of them function as reasons to deny that one can learn from visualizing.

[12] One may seek to block this implication by arguing that typically a conceptual work requires that the viewer have a thought with a certain content, corresponding to the content of the work. Meanwhile, it may be objected, Sartre's and Wittgenstein's arguments do not threaten this requirement, in so far as they do not undermine the view that in having a mental image one can learn something about thought content, but only the view that one can thereby learn about objects in the world. However, even if this is a better characterization of the requirements upon a viewer of conceptual art, typically the content of a conceptual work which viewers are supposed to grasp is thought content which is potentially new to the viewer (including, usually, thought

In the rest of this paper, I shall concentrate on the conclusions about images drawn by Sartre and Wittgenstein. I shall identify certain reasons they present for denying that visualizing can teach us about objects, and suggest that they are not sufficient to establish this. Later on, I shall suggest that, had such reasons succeeded, it would have followed that nothing could be learnt from propositional imagining either, thereby ruling out propositional imagining as a route to the illumination of the meanings of conceptual artworks, as well as visualizing. Hence, as well as being of broader philosophical interest, my argument will allow us to retain imagining of both kinds as a potentially central activity in interaction with conceptual works.

A few preliminaries: first, my goal is to scrutinize certain claims of Sartre and Wittgenstein in relative isolation, rather than to attempt to integrate them into a reconstruction of the respective wider views. Secondly, though there is much of interest to say about memory images, I shall focus only on claims about visualizing in an imaginative sense. Thirdly, the claim that one cannot learn about objects from visualizing is consistent with the possibility that one can learn thereby about other things: for instance, about one's emotions, desires, neuroses, and so on. Here, however, I shall concentrate on learning about objects.

(1) One does not observe mental images.

This is the well-known point that one does not *observe* mental images to see what they represent, as one might look at a picture or observe some object in the world and reach a conclusion as to its nature.

> Our attitude towards the object of the image could be called 'quasi-observation'.[13]
> A principal mark that distinguishes image from sense-impression and from hallucination is that the one who has the image does not behave as an observer in relation to the image . . .[14]

Comment can be made relatively swiftly. It is true that one does not observe mental images to see what they are 'of', not least for reasons offered by

content of the artist). At face value, some of Sartre's and Wittgenstein's points (specifically, claims (3) and (4), and perhaps (5) and (6) as well) threaten even this revised claim. Though in what follows I shall focus on the possibility of learning about objects from mental images, it should be borne in mind that several of the arguments advanced by my opponents threaten not only this possibility, but also the possibility of learning via images about the thought contents of others. As such, my rejection of these arguments shall deflect at least two possible sources of doubt about the role of imagining in understanding conceptual works.

[13] Sartre, *POI*, 9. [14] Wittgenstein, *RPPI*, §885.

Wittgenstein: in the grammar of mental images, there is no logical role for 'turning my attention onto my own consciousness';[15] no such thing as 'inner pointing',[16] as there would need to be to make sense of the claim that observation occurs here. However, it does not follow from this, considered on its own, that one cannot learn about objects from visualizing.

What does follow, of course, is that one cannot gain *observational* knowledge from visualizing (that is, knowledge acquired, relatively directly, via observation). However, this is not the only kind of knowledge there is, obviously. Sartre has been charged with implying that all knowledge is observational: that

> I cannot *gain* knowledge about something through a *purely* mental activity—i.e., without taking in something 'from outside' or, more specifically, without perceiving something about it.[17]

If this is indeed his view,[18] then the existence of conceptual knowledge, derived through 'pure' reflection, clearly refutes it, as does the existence of empirical knowledge derived via reflection on existing non-perceptual beliefs.[19] It remains to be seen whether, analogously, non-observational knowledge of some kind is available from visualizing.

(2) One does not interpret mental images, as one would signs or pictures.

Sartre's defence of this claim, like the last, comes in an attack on what he calls 'the illusion of immanence': the view of mental images as objects 'in' the head, to be interpreted. On the rejected view, in having an image of an entity E, one has an element representing E somehow 'in' one's consciousness, which bears only an 'extrinsic' relation to the objects it represents, standing towards it in the relation of a sign or picture, which has to be interpreted in order to render its meaning.

Sartre seems right to reject this. Broadly construed, signs are understood either by learning a set of associations, or conventions. Neither of these is the appropriate model upon which to construe one's relation to a mental image. As Sartre notes,[20] mental images are not items one has to *learn* to interpret, as signs are. Furthermore, that mental images require interpretation

[15] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §412 (henceforth *PI*).
[16] Wittgenstein, *PI*, §669–71.
[17] Paul Taylor, 'Imagination and Information', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 42/2 (1981), 208.
[18] This view reappears in Alan White, *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell 1990), 111.
[19] Taylor, *ibid.*, 209. [20] Sartre, *POI*, 68.

would entail there being, potentially, two acts of consciousness rather than one: an initial, perhaps confused, cognition of the image, followed by an interpretative conclusion. This does not ring true phenomenologically (as Sartre puts it, 'the material of the mental object' is 'already constituted as an object for consciousness');[21] additionally, there is the fact, suggested by remarks of Wittgenstein,[22] that we have no criterion for establishing whether in this case one would be mentally engaging with one image on two occasions, or two.

Nor does an image of E stand for E in virtue of resemblance relations, as pictures may do.[23] First, as acknowledged, one does not observe mental images, as the claim would require. Secondly, a picture, taken on its own, might represent any one of several states of affairs. As Wittgenstein notes, for instance, a picture of 'an old man walking up a steep path leaning on a stick' might have looked 'just the same if he had been sliding downhill in that position'.[24] If one were to treat images as pictures, whose objects were determined by what they (most) resembled, their content would be potentially ambiguous, even to the thinker. Yet the content of mental images, like most mental content, is transparently accessible to the thinker (of which more later).

However, that understanding a mental image is not equivalent to interpreting a sign or picture does not entail that one cannot learn about objects from visualizing. That in consideration of mental images, there is no act of interpretation, but only one experienced stage—becoming immediately and directly conscious of what an image is 'of'—does not *in itself* preclude thereby acquiring new knowledge. It might still be possible to say, for instance, that without having had a particular mental image, one would not have known what one now knows.

Consider an analogy: it is widely denied that perception is interpretative, i.e. that one first perceives basic shapes, and only then interprets what such shapes mean. Yet, of course, this should not threaten the conclusion that one can learn about objects from perceptual experience. Nor is the conclusion that we can learn from visualizing jeopardized by an absence of interpretation alone.

(3) Mental images are constituted by the thinker, not received from the world.

[21] *Ibid.*, 61. [22] Wittgenstein, *PI*, §382.

[23] Those that reject this view of pictures presumably see them as conventional.

[24] Wittgenstein, *PI*, *n.* to p. 4e.

The assumption here, endorsed by Sartre, is that, while perceiving is largely a matter of passively receiving information from objects via retinal input, visualizing is, perhaps wholly, a matter of actively creating.

> No matter how long I may look at an image, I shall never find anything in it but what I put there.[25]

Wittgenstein expresses a similar thought:

> The concept of imagining is rather like one of doing than receiving. Imagining might be called a creative act.[26]

Often this is equated with the claim that mental images are subject to the will (see the next section). However, they are not equivalent,[27] so I shall treat them separately.

One can see why this claim might lead one to conclude that one cannot learn from visualizing: after all, if images are purely a product of the imaginer, then they need bear no reliable relation, potentially, to the objects they represent. However, the antecedent here is false.

One need not endorse a view of images of a perniciously Humean sort[28] to admit that the content of an image of an entity E must coincide, to some extent, with the content of beliefs one has about E. E could not be presented in an image in a way which in no way coincided with any beliefs one had about the nature of E (broadly construed); for in that case, one would not have an image of E at all.[29]

This claim needs to be distinguished from others with which it might be confused. It is not the claim that the content of an image of E must coincide *only* with the content of beliefs one has about E, since otherwise one could not have images of objects with aspects of their habitual appearance altered,

[25] Sartre, *POI*, 7 *et passim*.

[26] Wittgenstein, *RPPII*, §111. See also, Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §632.

[27] That an image is subject to the will, in the sense explored in the next section, does not entail that it is wholly constituted by the thinker.

[28] Hume largely saw images as copies of sense impressions. The problems with this view are spelled out by Anthony Manser, *Sartre: An Introduction* 'New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), ch. 2.

[29] More precisely, the content of an image of an entity E must coincide, to some extent, with the content of *true* beliefs one has about E. If I have only false beliefs about E, then even if such beliefs inform what I take to be an image of E, it is not clear that I actually have an image of E. This qualification is not important for what follows.

as one can. (Indeed, if this were so, arguably, one would not be imagining so much as considering, or remembering, or something like it.) Nor is it the claim that for any image of E, there are certain beliefs *in particular* about E which one's image must reflect: perhaps any given belief one has about an entity may fail to inform one's image of it. What is claimed is that not all of them may, simultaneously. Finally, nor is it the claim that one's image of E must reflect some of one's beliefs *about the visual appearance* of E. In that case, it would not be possible to have a mental image of, say, the Eiffel Tower, totally wrapped in parachute silk, so that its shape is obscured; yet this seems to be possible. The claim is rather that an image of an entity must reflect at least some of one's (perhaps non-perceptually derived) beliefs about it.[30] Of course, typically, one's mental image of an entity E is partly informed by beliefs about the characteristic appearance of E; but perhaps this need not always be the case.

Given this background, it is wrong to suggest that the content of a mental image is wholly contributed by the thinker: *for those beliefs which partly inform a mental image are contributed by the world, not the thinker*. Take the case where I am considering whether a particular green dress of mine would suit a friend and form a mental image of her in it, partly informed by beliefs I already have about the appearances of, respectively, the friend and the dress (though an image need not reflect beliefs about visual appearances, typically, it will). In which case, I got such beliefs from the world. I did not make them up. I originally acquired them through perceptions, either directly or indirectly. Of course, any such image is not *caused* by my friend actually wearing the dress, as a visual image would be, but it is partly caused by aspects of the world nonetheless. Wherever an image is partly informed by beliefs, as all images must be, the world has made a contribution to that image, in so far as the beliefs in question are gained from the world.

So the fact that mental images are partly structured by prior beliefs undermines the claim that such images are wholly constituted by the thinker. This clears a space for a description of how one can learn from visualizing, in virtue of this world-derived content. Later, I shall try to provide such a description.

Meanwhile I need to dismiss a further potential source of the view that mental images are wholly created, not received. This arises in Sartre's comparison of

[30] Admittedly, how a mental image 'reflects' non-perceptual beliefs is a difficult question. Perhaps one way in which it does so is that it constrains the direction events represented in the image may take.

visualizing with perceiving, where he writes that perceived objects exhibit the characteristic of 'brimming over'.[31] Sartre characterizes an entity's 'brimming over' in terms of two factors, potentially: firstly, its standing in an in(de)finite[32] number of (presumably perceptual or conceptual) 'relationships' to other objects, or secondly, its being composed of 'elements' which too stand in in(de)finite numbers of relationships to one another, and to the elements of surrounding objects.[33] Objects in visual perception can do both of these things, we are told; objects in mental images can do neither. Most of the relationships in which an object, or elements of it, stand to other objects are not apparent to one on first seeing it, and one could never be aware of all of them from a single perception. In this sense, the nature of an object, understood in a rich sense, always exceeds one's current visual perception of it.[34] In contrast, a mental image displays an 'essential poverty'.[35] The quasi-visual elements of an image do not stand to other things in any relationships other than those in which I already imagine them to do so.[36] This is because the objects of visualizing 'exist only in so far as they are thought of'.[37] While 'the object of the perception overflows consciousness constantly',

> . . . the object of the image is never more than the consciousness one has of it; it is limited by that consciousness; nothing can be learned from an image that is not already known.[38]

Sartre conflates two distinct points here: first, that an image cannot outstrip one's awareness of it, in the sense that it has no features which one is not currently aware of; and second, that *the object of* an image (the thing picked out by the image) cannot outstrip one's awareness of it, in the sense that it has no features which one is not currently aware of. If the latter claim were true, and the features of an object in one's image were entirely determined by whether one was thinking of them or not, and what one was thinking, then clearly, this would support the claim that the object of an image is wholly constituted by the thinker. However, it is false.

Sartre is right in his first point. We have no reason to assume that in becoming conscious of some aspect of an image, one is becoming conscious

[31] Sartre, *POI*, 8

[32] 'Indefinite' seems an improvement on Sartre's 'infinite'; Gregory McCulloch, *Using Sartre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 74.

[33] Sartre, *POI*, 7 [34] *Ibid.*, 7–8. [35] *Ibid.*, 8.

[36] *Ibid.* [37] *Ibid.* [38] *Ibid.*

of something that was 'already there', waiting to be discovered, as part of a picture might be. However, we can concede this without it following that the *object* of an image cannot outstrip one's awareness of it.

For one thing, this seems to contradict the plausible point, insisted upon elsewhere by Sartre, that an image is not a thing in consciousness, via which one is *indirectly* aware of some object in the world, but rather is a way of being related consciously, *directly*, to such an object. To think otherwise is to get it wrong about what the intentional object of thought is.[39] In an image of Peter, for instance,

> . . . [t]he imaginative consciousness I have of Peter is not a consciousness of the image of Peter: Peter is directly reached; my attention is not directed on an image, but on an object.[40]

So we can think of Sartre as a kind of 'direct realist' about mental images.[41] Yet, if we take this insistence seriously, as I think we should, we must admit that (whatever problems this view generates for images of non-existent objects)[42] to have a mental image of, say, Westminster Abbey, is to be directly related in thought to the real Westminster Abbey.

Now, the real Westminster Abbey does not exist only in so far as it is thought of; at least, not on the standard story. Rather it is mind-independent, and indeed 'brims over', i.e. exists in in(de)finite relationships to other objects around it, etc. Sartre cannot maintain that objects in mental images do not brim over, on the one hand, and on the other, maintain that visualizing

[39] *Ibid.*, 2–5. [40] *Ibid.*, 5.

[41] Admittedly, the story is complicated by Sartre's later use of the concept of an 'analogon' which according to him is an intermediary in imaginative thought between thinker and object, though it is not experienced as such by the thinker, who is conscious only of the object. However, as long as he insists that to have an image of x is to be conscious of an x, not of an intermediary which stands for x (as I think he should) then he should also admit that x may 'brim over' in a mental image.

[42] There is much that is problematic about Sartre's 'direct realism', not least the problems that not all images are of existing things (McCulloch, *Using Sartre*, appendix to ch. 2) nor are they 'of' particulars (*ibid.*, 72). The former problem beset accounts of perception, in so far as hallucinations and illusions are possible. Since it is not sufficient to undermine direct realism about perception, and since promising solutions are emerging to this problem (for instance, disjunctivism), I take it that the problem of images of non-existents is not sufficient to undermine direct realism about images, although obviously some further account needs to be given. Anyone worried about the absence of such an account can take the scope of my claims about images as confined to images of existent particulars.

involves direct awareness of some particular in the world. Given the latter claim, he should conclude that, like a perceived entity, an entity in a mental image brims over in so far as the total amount of information potentially available about its characteristics inevitably exceeds the information available in any single mental image of it. That this is so is unaffected by the fact that mental images cannot outstrip our awareness of them.

Still, there does seem something right, at least in spirit, with the claim that objects in mental images cannot brim over. It seems to be this: continuous or repeated perceptions of an object can provide one with various information about the object unavailable via continuous or repeated mental images of it. Most obviously, while changes in visual perceptions of E tend to reflect changes in the nature of E, changes in one's mental image of E do not tend to reflect changes in the nature of E. That is, visualizing cannot give us reliable 'real-time' information about objects.

However, this does not entail that visualizing cannot give us any sort of reliable information about objects *at all*. Many beliefs cannot track 'real-time' changes in objects either, and yet there is no temptation to deny that one can learn about the world from such beliefs. More generally, though it is true that mental images are restricted in the sorts of reliable information they can provide, it does not follow that learning anything about objects from them is impossible. So again, the point fails to show what it is supposed to.

(4) Mental images are subject to the will.

This thought is apparently the main source of Wittgenstein's claim that visualizing cannot give us new information about the external world.[43] The sense in which Wittgenstein claims that mental images are subject to the will is not that they always occur voluntarily, for he admits that some mental images arrive involuntarily.[44] Rather, a mental image is subject to the will in the sense that

> it makes sense to order someone to 'Imagine that', or again: 'Don't imagine that'.[45]

In contrast, it makes no sense to order someone to see something, providing their eyes are open and they are looking with full attention. From this, Wittgenstein concludes that

[43] This is stressed by Malcolm Budd, *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 104, 113, *et passim*.

[44] Wittgenstein, *RPPII*, §83. [45] *Ibid.*, §86.

[i]t is just because imaging is subject to the will that it does not instruct us about the external world.[46]

Now, perhaps the central point that Wittgenstein is making is only that the fact that visualizing is subject to the will distinguishes its occurrence from *observing*.[47] Whatever, it is certainly true that *prima facie* his remarks support the broader claim.[48] Hence it is worthwhile examining what consequences follow from the subjection of images to the will for the possibility of learning.

That mental images are subject to the will in the sense identified seems right. Even where a mental image has occurred involuntarily, it makes sense to order someone to stop imagining it, or at least, to try to. However, it is not clear why the fact that one can sensibly be ordered to have a thought, or not to have, should entail that one cannot learn from it while one has it. A history student can be ordered to think about the Great Exhibition, rather than daydreaming, without it following that they can learn nothing from any thoughts they then might have. In short, the fact that a mental item is subject to the will in the sense intended, when considered on its own, does not offer any reason to deny that one can learn from that item about objects in the world.

One might object that the sense considered in which a mental image may be subject to the will is unduly restrictive. In fact, there are two different things that might be meant by this. One is that the occurrence of a mental image is subject to the will, in the sense that one sensibly can be ordered to have it, or not. This is the sense just discussed. The second is that the *content* of a mental image is subject to the will.

Presumably this claim cannot mean that images with certain contents never occur involuntarily, for again this is to ignore the fact that certain images, with particular contents, can occur to one unsought. A better interpretation is that, for any mental image, it would make sense to order someone who had that image to change any aspect of the image's content.

Assuming that one can talk legitimately of a change in the content of a single image,[49] this claim seems true. Of course, for many images, changing some

[46] *Ibid.*, §80. [47] *Ibid.*, §131.

[48] The broader claim is reiterated by commentators, e.g. Budd attributes to Wittgenstein the view that 'images tell us nothing, either right or wrong, about the external world' (*Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology*, 101).

[49] This assumes that one could ascertain that what looked like a change in the content of a single image actually counted as such, rather than as the introduction of a different image altogether.

aspects of their content in particular ways could not sensibly be demanded. One could not sensibly be ordered to visualize a square circle, for instance. But this is not being denied, since all that is being claimed is that one could be sensibly ordered to change any aspect of an image *in some way*. Nor does this conflict with what follows from a point made earlier: that, where one has a mental image of E, one cannot sensibly be ordered to change one's image of E so that it reflects *none* of one's beliefs about E.

However, even if it is true that, for any aspect of the content of a given mental image, one can be sensibly ordered to change it, it does not follow that one cannot learn about objects from visualizing. For the underlying principle invoked must be that, wherever one can be sensibly ordered to change any aspect of the content of a given mental item, it follows that one cannot learn about the world from that item. And this seems to be false. I can be ordered to think of a recent party as I believe it to have been (dull), or to imagine it differently, as having been marvellously glamorous. This does not show, in itself, that I cannot learn from the former thought, unaltered. Analogously, nor does the fact that I might be sensibly ordered to have an image of my friend with a different bodily appearance shows that I cannot learn anything about her, even where I have an image of her with her characteristic appearance, in a green dress.

One might object that there is a disanalogy here, in so far as in the first case there is an envisioned switch from belief to imagining, and in the second there is an envisioned switch only from imagining to a different imagining. But this could be a difficulty only were it independently established that one can learn only from beliefs, not imaginings, which is what is being investigated. Furthermore, as already argued, images partly reflect beliefs, so it is still possible that one might learn from images via such beliefs.

I suspect that behind the thought that learning from an image is ruled out by the fact that one might (sensibly be ordered to) change any aspect of its content is the further thought, already rejected, that in having an image of E, one is, at best, only indirectly related in thought to E; and at worst, not related in thought to E at all. If that were right, then, in changing the content of an image, perhaps one would change the nature of the object directly thought of, so that perhaps one then would be thinking of a different object (if I imagine the party to have been exciting, I am no longer thinking about *that* party, but about a different one; if I imagine my friend with a different appearance, I am no longer thinking about *that* friend). In that case,

any potentially reliable connection between thought and object in the world would be severed. However, if we accept that to have an image of E is to be directly related in thought to some genuine E, then it is not clear why the fact that one might have considered E differently entails that nothing can be learnt from the way one currently considers it.

(5) Mental images are superfluous to any conclusion reached.

It may be complained that an important point has not yet been properly addressed. At times, Sartre apparently acknowledges that understanding of an object may arrive simultaneously with, or after, a mental image. However, he suggests that any such understanding does not result *from* the image, but rather has taken the form of an image: it has adopted 'the imaginative structure':

> Understanding attains its end *as an image*, but not *by* the image.[50]

As another commentator, Alan White, puts it:

> Trying to visualize a room is trying to think what it looks or would look like. Succeeding in visualizing it is not what enables us to think what it looks like: the former is the latter. Visualization supplies me with answers, for instance how many chairs were in the room, in the same way that thinking about something does.[51]

There are several ways of reading Sartre's point. One is that since having an image is itself a kind of thinking, it cannot enable thought. As expressed by White, the point seems to be that while perceiving E 'enables us to think what it looks like', and so can be distinguished from simply thinking what E looks like, imagining an E *is* a kind of thinking what E looks like, and so cannot play the appropriate enabling role. Yet this contrast seems false: perceiving is not an activity which takes place before thought begins, but, on any plausible account, is infused to some degree with conceptual content, notwithstanding that it clearly 'enables' (other) thoughts about objects. In any case, it seems ludicrous to suggest that thinking cannot enable new thought; as previously discussed, this is belied by knowledge of an everyday kind, arrived at via simple reflection without any direct perceptual input.

Another way of reading Sartre's point is that visualizing can reflect only what non-imagistic thinking might otherwise have achieved; in which case, it cannot be truly said that it is the visualizing which is the source of learning. There are

[50] Sartre, *POI*, 116–18; quote from 118. [51] White, *Language of Imagination*, 57.

three things to say here. First, if this means that an image can convey only what non-imagistic *recollection* of knowledge already possessed might otherwise have conveyed,[52] then this presupposes that one cannot learn anything new from an image, which has yet to be convincingly shown. Alternatively, if it means that any *new* knowledge that occurs simultaneously with a mental image might have been acquired via non-imagistic thinking, and so is not really a product of the image, then this looks a wholly implausible claim. We would not, after all, deny that one could learn from visual perceptions about the nature of an object, simply on the grounds that the information thereby acquired might also have been acquired via non-perceptually derived inference.

Third, it is not clear that all of the (new) knowledge provided by a mental image might have been acquired in some other way. Rather, visualizing can provide us with knowledge about how an object *would look* under certain circumstances.[53] This, I shall suggest, is not knowledge which could have been acquired in some other way.

I have argued that, in all cases, a mental image of E is partly informed by some of one's (true) beliefs about E, allowing that these may not be beliefs about the visual appearance of E. However, since, typically, mental images are partly informed by beliefs about visual appearances, I shall focus only on such cases from now on. In fact, I shall focus only on a subset of such cases: namely, those images informed by beliefs about visual appearances which have experiential content, i.e. beliefs which are gained via relatively immediate experience, and which convey the phenomenological 'look' of objects in a way which could not be captured by propositional beliefs alone (beliefs about appearances, in terms of particular colours, shades, shapes, lines, angles, and so on). Typically, mental images are partly informed by beliefs with such content (henceforth, 'visual beliefs' for short).[54]

Now, generally, it is possible to form new beliefs about a certain entity, on the basis of awareness (explicit or implicit) of prior beliefs about that entity: as, familiarly, in inductive and deductive inference. And this being so, where, for instance, one forms an image of certain entities in combination, which is partly informed by prior visual beliefs about the respective entities,

[52] For discussion, see Taylor 'Imagination and Information', 209–10, 215.

[53] This point, and certain of those that follow, resemble points made by Taylor in 'Imagination and Information'.

[54] Taylor's way of putting this point is that an image is 'always, to some extent, a manifestation of remembered experience' (*ibid.*, 217).

I see no reason to deny that it is possible to form new beliefs about the counterfactual appearances of the entities in combination, on the basis of becoming aware of those prior beliefs. As the image forms, I suggest, so too can one form (some) new beliefs about the objects imagined that one did not have before.

For instance, when I form an image of my friend in the green dress, an image which is informed by some of the visual beliefs I already have about, respectively, my friend and the dress, I can simultaneously form some new beliefs about the visual appearance my friend *would have* in the dress, based on awareness of those prior beliefs.[55] Though my newly formed beliefs are logically preceded by my prior beliefs, they need not be chronologically preceded by them: the new beliefs can form simultaneously with awareness of the image (just as new beliefs can form simultaneously with the consideration of old ones).

These new beliefs are not arrived at via deduction, but then, not all beliefs are arrived at deductively.[56] I do not pretend to describe how such new beliefs are justified by the prior beliefs in question; indeed, it is not clear that one *could* adequately describe how certain prior visual beliefs justify further beliefs about the counterfactual appearance of an object.[57] I claim only that, given: (a) that mental images are partly structured by prior beliefs, typically of a visual kind; (b) that generally, we are familiar with the formation of new beliefs on the basis of prior beliefs; (c) that so far we have found no good reason to deny that new beliefs about counterfactual appearances can form as an image forms; and (d) that our pre-reflective intuitions support this possibility; then (e) we can assert with a degree of confidence that new beliefs about counterfactual appearances can be formed as an image forms, most plausibly on the basis of the relevant prior beliefs. As is rightly intimated by Sartre and Wittgenstein, one does not arrive at such new beliefs via a process of observing or interpreting some 'inner' object. But denying this is compatible with asserting that one can arrive at new beliefs via an image: namely, where

[55] I take it that when Taylor refers to mental images giving rise to 'spontaneous acts of synthesis' (*ibid.*, 210, 218), it is something like this that he has in mind.

[56] *Ibid.*, 210 and 215.

[57] Taylor connects this point to the Kantian point that there are no *a priori* rules for the application of aesthetic concepts (*ibid.*, 215). Though I do not see this debate as concerned only with the aesthetic aspects of objects (see *n.* 8), it seems implausible that there could be *a priori* rules governing counterfactual appearances.

it is true that, had one not had the image, one would not have arrived at the given beliefs.

The next thing to establish is whether such new beliefs might count as knowledge,[58] and so as 'learning' in any interesting sense. I do not see why not. It may be objected that any new beliefs about the counterfactual appearance of an object, formed on the basis of an image, are not justified, because they are not, in fact, a reliable guide to the way the object would look.[59] Empirically, however, this seems to be to be false. Otherwise it is hard to explain the apparent sense of such familiar claims as 'that's just how I thought it would look!', as well as our frequent *lack* of surprise when actually confronted with previously unexperienced visual aspects of the world. Of course, depending on their content, *some* images may be wholly unreliable guides to the counterfactual appearances of objects (perhaps those which present an object whilst reflecting very few of one's beliefs about it). However, this does not show that other images cannot be reliable, and in fact, experience shows us that some are.

Of course, the prior beliefs upon which I base my new beliefs may, for all I know, be false; but this is true of belief formation generally and is not normally, except to a rabid Cartesian, an obstacle to counting further beliefs formed on the basis of them as knowledge, so long as the initial beliefs are true. It is also true that the new beliefs are not beliefs about aspects or characteristics which the object currently has, but are beliefs about how the object *would look* (or *might look*); but I do not see why such beliefs may not be knowledge, all the same. Information about the actual aspects of an object is not the only information one might get about an object.

This being so, the present discussion has provided a response to the objection raised earlier. Assuming it is possible to have knowledge of how an object would or might look in counterfactual situations, it is not clear where else one would get such knowledge *except* through visualizing. One cannot get it from perception alone, since by themselves visual perceptions can only inform one about how objects actually *do* look. Nor is such knowledge obviously available via 'bare' propositional thought (or imagining) alone. Visualizing can give us a kind of new knowledge—namely, knowledge about counterfactual appearances—which is unavailable through other routes, conceptual or perceptual.

[58] I will take it that knowledge is justified true belief.

[59] For further discussion, see Taylor, 'Imagination and Information', 222.

The positive conclusion reached here is the inverse of one of Sartre's. He writes, attempting to support the view that mental images come from the thinker rather than the world,

> it cannot be said that an image clarifies our knowledge in any manner whatsoever for the very reason that it is the knowledge that constitutes the image.[60]

In fact, I have argued, it is the very fact that our images are partly informed by prior beliefs which makes it possible that we can learn from images, rather than ruling it out.

(6) One cannot be misled about the object of one's mental images.

A final line of objection remains. Sartre argues that one cannot be misled as to the object(s) of one's mental image. He takes himself to offer some grounds for endorsing this claim in a comparison he makes between seeing on the one hand, and visualizing on the other.[61] His apparent conclusion is that information presented in visual perception is potentially misleading, while that presented in a mental image is not. Objects are seen from a particular perspective, or point of view, which may, for those unfamiliar with perspective, distort conclusions as to the true shape characteristics of that object.[62] Furthermore, a visual perspective on a three-dimensional object can give access only to part of an object at a time, and so is necessarily incomplete. For instance, it is only possible to see three sides of a cube at once, not six.[63] Again, then, there is the possibility of being misled by the partial visual information one presently has; for instance:

> . . . when I pass, for example, from sides ABC to sides BCD [of a cube], there always remains a possibility that side A has disappeared during my change of position.[64]

(Perhaps more realistically, there is also a chance that one can be wrong about the sort of object one is perceiving: perhaps one is looking, not at a cube, but rather at an object which only looks like a cube from the front.)

In contrast, Sartre claims, in a mental image of E, there is no possibility of one's being misled as to the object of the image, based on the 'appearance' of E in the image.

[60] Sartre, *POI*, 96.
[61] *Ibid.*, ch. 1, §3. There is also a comparison with non-imagistic thoughts of objects, which is not relevant for our purposes.
[62] *Ibid.* 6 [63] *Ibid.* [64] *Ibid.*

When I say, 'the object I perceive is a cube', I make an hypothesis that I may have to reject at the close of my perceptions. When I say, 'the object of which I have an image at this moment is a cube', my judgment is final: it is absolutely certain that the object of my image is a cube.[65]

Though visualizing, like visual perceptions, present objects perspectivally, it is not possible that, for all one knows, the nature of the object thought of in the image is other than one takes it to be.

Sartre takes these points to support the conclusion that one cannot learn from images, though the precise nature of the supposed connection is unclear to me. Perhaps it goes as follows. One cannot be misled as to the object(s) of one's mental image. Meanwhile, one can only be ignorant of things that one might possibly be misled about; and one can only learn about things one might possibly be ignorant of. Ignorance requires the possibility of error, and learning requires the possibility of ignorance.[66]

Though they look plausible, I dare say that some may reject the claims of the last two sentences. I prefer to focus instead on the first assumption, that one cannot be misled as to the object(s) of one's mental image for it turns out that in the only sense potentially conducive to the conclusion that one cannot learn about objects from visualizing, this claim is false.

There are two different things one might mean by this claim. It might mean that (a) in having an image, one cannot be misled as to what the image represents, i.e. its content. (This would mean that, for instance, in visualizing a particular horse, one cannot thereby be misled about whether one is thinking about that particular horse or not.) Alternatively, it might mean that (b) in having a mental image, one cannot be misled about those aspects of the world which either one takes to be, or are, (part of) the causal origin of one's image.[67] (This would mean that, for instance, in visualizing a particular horse, one cannot thereby be misled about the nature of that claim). (a) is a way of being misled about the nature of one's image, and is unconnected to whether the content of one's images reflects the way the world is or not; (b), in contrast, is a way of being misled about objects in the world.

[65] Sartre, *POI*, 7.

[66] I am indebted to Robert Hopkins for this suggestion.

[67] Christopher Peacocke, 'Imagination, Experience, and Possibility', in J. Foster and H. Robinson (eds.), *Essays on Berkeley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 27; Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 162, *n.*

Now, Sartre is licensed to make claim (a), given his assumption that a human being has the capacity for transparent access to the contents of consciousness.[68] This assumption is at the root of his project,[69] which he regards as phenomenology, or 'description'.[70] Wittgenstein, too, endorses the view that one has a peculiar authority with respect to one's visual images, in that what determines what one's image is an image 'of' is what one is prepared to say sincerely about that content;[71] or, perhaps, the picture one is prepared to draw of it.[72] If it is true that a person has transparent access to the contents of consciousness, then it follows that one cannot be misled as to what one's image represents, i.e. its content.

However, the truth of (a) does not entail that one cannot learn about objects from one's images (or that one cannot be misled about them). For claim (a) is not a special fact about mental images, but stems from a more general point about mental contents.[73] Assuming that one has transparent access to the contents of conscious thought, even so, this does not entail that one cannot learn about objects via thought. Consider the case where I (non-imaginatively) draw a conclusion about the nature of E, based on consideration of certain premises which I hold to be true. The manifest fact that there I can be said to have learnt something about E is not undermined by the thought that I cannot be misled as to what I am thinking, in the sense that I cannot be misled as to the content of my thoughts (e.g. it makes no sense to tell me that I am not really thinking of E). Hence, nor does it have this consequence where one's thoughts involve mental images.

Meanwhile, claim (b), which *does* look relevant to the possibility of learning from visualizing, is false. This is because, as I have stressed, a mental image of an object must partly reflect some of one's beliefs about that object. Some of those beliefs may be, unbeknownst to one, false, leading one to further false beliefs about the nature of the object. This being the case, it is possible for one's image to mislead one about certain aspects of the world in the sense of claim (b). Altering a famous example discussed by Wittgenstein, take the case where someone has in the past been shown Westminster Cathedral, and falsely told that it is Westminster Abbey, so that she gains beliefs about the appearance of the Abbey, based on the appearance of the Cathedral. This person then has a

[68] Sartre, *POI*, 1. [69] McCulloch, *Using Sartre*, 2. [70] Sartre, *POI*, 62.
[71] Wittgenstein, *PI*, §367. [72] *Ibid.*, §300.
[73] Peacocke, 'Imagination, Experience and Possibility', 27.

mental image which she takes to be 'of' Westminster Abbey on fire, informed by the false visual beliefs she has about the Abbey. In that case, surely, her mental image misleads her as to what Westminster Abbey would look like, were it on fire. In other words, she is misled about certain aspects of the world (in this case, Westminster Abbey): namely, those which she takes to be part of the causal origin of her image.

Someone might protest that in this case, it is not the *image* that has done the misleading; it is rather one's prior false beliefs about the appearance of Westminster Abbey. However, things seem symmetrical in the case of visual perception: were the same person to *look* at Westminster Cathedral on fire, and thereby arrive at a false belief about how Westminster Abbey looks when it is on fire, she would do so partly on the basis of her prior false belief about the Abbey's appearance, and yet this is no impediment to saying, fairly naturally, that the she would have been misled by what she has seen.

I have argued that the sense in which it is true that one cannot be misled as to the object of one's mental image is irrelevant to the possibility of learning from visualizing; meanwhile, in the only sense relevant to that claim, one can be so misled. Hence, once again, no support is found here for the claim that learning about objects from images of them is impossible.[74]

10.7 Images and Propositional Imaginings

Here I conclude my dismissal of the reasons for which one might have supposed that one cannot learn about objects from visualizing. It is important to note that, had certain of these reasons succeeded, then they also would have succeeded in showing that one cannot learn about objects from 'bare' propositional imaginings, with no experiential component. For many of

[74] Meanwhile, when Sartre claims that, in the case of visual perception, one *can* be misled as to what one has perceived, he seems to mean that, in having a visual perception of an object, one can be misled as to the nature of the object which one takes to cause, or cause, one's visual perception (cf. his example of how one can be misled as to whether one is really looking at a cube). Yet it seems that, just as one cannot be misled as to the content of one's mental images in the sense that one has transparent access to such content; so too is it true that one cannot be misled as to the content of one's visual perceptions (i.e. when I say that the content of my visual image is that of a red pillar box, it makes no sense for another to deny this). In other words, on the issue of the possibility of being misled, Sartre has offered us a false contrast between mental images and visual perceptions, trading on an ambiguity in what exactly one may be misled about.

the points cited to show that one cannot learn from images apply equally to propositional imaginings: one does not observe one's propositional imaginings; nor interpret what they represent; nor do they provide real-time information; and nor is it nonsensical to command someone to stop having a certain propositional imagining, or to change its content. Furthermore, in the only sense in which it is true that one cannot be mistaken about the object of one's mental images (in the sense that the contents of consciousness are transparently accessible), so too is it apparently true that one cannot be mistaken about the object of propositional imagining. Hence any support such reasons gave to the claim that one cannot learn from images would equally have jeopardized the confidence with which we might talk of using propositional imagining to understand conceptual art.[75] To the extent that my discussion has succeeded, so does it potentially deflect any concern about the role of imagining generally in understanding conceptual art.[76]

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[75] Not to mention the confidence with which philosophers use thought experiments to draw conclusions about the world.

[76] I would like to thank Robert Hopkins for very helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

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